

Have you Heard?



## THE TRUTH ABOUT KINDERGARTEN



A Guide to Understanding Kindergarten  
Presented by the New Jersey Department of Education



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My hope is that our children will continue to learn in kindergarten, as they have in preschool-- with joy in their accomplishments, with willingness to meet new challenges, with natural curiosity about their world, and with persistence to continue learning despite whatever obstacles they might encounter.

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Commissioner of Education

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## naeyc note

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is dedicated to improving the well-being of all young children, with particular focus on the quality of educational and developmental services for all children from birth through age 8. NAEYC is committed to becoming an increasingly high performing and inclusive organization.

Within this document, you will notice “NAEYC Notes.” These are tips taken from various NAEYC publications regarding best practice for the education of young children. For more information about NAEYC, visit [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org).





Kindergarten is the place for young children to learn. It must be ready for them so that their learning is unhampered and they can try out new skills without fear of mistakes. Kindergarten is a time of growth, experimentation, and a budding understanding of the world and their place within it.

Kindergarten children learn by experiencing the world around them. They explore, examine, and try to figure out what everything means. They cannot yet do things perfectly, but everyday, they learn something new. It doesn't happen all at once, yet as they progress, they get closer and closer to speaking clearly, recognizing letters and sounds, understanding and creating stories, counting real things, adding and subtracting, and dividing their blocks evenly among their friends.

This booklet has been created to help parents, educators, and the community understand the key components of a high quality kindergarten.

# HOW YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

Understanding HOW young children learn is:

- Critical to creating an environment that will encourage growth and support success
- Should be a priority for all adults who are charged with encouraging young children to develop and grow- whether family members or educators



Young children learn in the following ways:

- **Talking** with friends, answering thoughtful questions posed by adults, commenting on what they are doing and what they want to do, naming the things that surround them
- **Exploring** their environment and the materials in it by sliding, running, jumping or building houses with blocks
- **Practicing** new skills that adults, and sometimes older children, show them
- **Rehearsing** what they see around them by playing house or pretending to go to the doctor, store, or bank
- **Approximating** the standard way of doing things. Children learn to do things one small step at a time
- **Making Meaning** from each experience they have throughout their day

The five-year-old points to the word “parent.” She tries the first sound, “PPP Mommy.” Then she might say “PPP Papa.” The mother will say, “The word is parent.” The five-year-old may not be ready to read “parent” yet, but soon, she will be able to make the connection.

Young children try to make meaning from everything they do. Whether it is trying to make sense from squiggles that turn out to be letters and numbers or telling a story that includes both monsters and fairy princesses, young children try to understand what they see and hear. Adults help when they expand the child’s understanding by telling stories, reading books, and explaining what is going on wherever they go.

## naeyc note

### Top Ten Signs of a Quality Kindergarten

1. Children are playing and working with materials or other children. They are not aimlessly wandering or forced to sit quietly for long periods of time.
2. Children have access to various activities throughout the day. Children are not all doing the same thing at the same time.
3. Teachers work with individual children, small groups, and the whole group at different times during the day. They do not spend time only with the entire group.
4. The classroom is decorated with children's original artwork, their own writing with invented spelling, and stories children dictated.
5. Children learn numbers and the alphabet in the context of their everyday experiences.
6. Children work on projects and have long periods of time (at least one hour) to play and explore. Filling out worksheets should not be their primary activity.
7. Children have an opportunity to play outside every day that weather permits. This play is never sacrificed for more instructional time.
8. Teachers read books to children throughout the day, not just at group story time.
9. The curriculum is adapted for those who are ahead as well as those who need additional help. Because children differ in experiences and background, they do not learn the same things at the same time in the same way.
10. Children and their parents look forward to school. Parents feel safe sending their child to kindergarten. Children are happy; they are not crying or regularly sick.



# THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

The kindergarten classroom should be organized into interest areas or centers filled with a variety of materials and equipment including blocks, dramatic play supplies, science activities, books, art supplies and more.

Children must have time to experiment with measuring, counting, pouring, and making predictions using sand and water areas. Paper, scissors, markers, puzzles, and other hands-on materials that foster children's thinking and problem solving skills should be readily available. Books, printed words and samples of children's writing should be in every area of the room (NAEYC, 1997).

Children should have opportunities each day to enjoy physical activities indoors and, weather permitting, outside.

A consistent, flexible schedule offers plenty of time for learning and making choices. It also creates a minimal number of transitions, and limits time in whole groups or seat work.

The classroom should be decorated with original art and projects created by the children in the room rather than store bought decorations. This shows children how much their efforts are valued. Learning should take place throughout the day in large and small groups and in one to one interactions between the child and the teacher. This helps teachers understand the emerging skills of each child and to plan experiences that accommodate each child's own style of learning.



## naeyc note

Kindergarten teachers should offer experiences, materials and interactions that are safe, healthy, interesting, and achievable and challenging to kindergarten-aged children.



## Teachers & Families

Parents and teachers are jointly responsible for ensuring that children are successful in school, thus making communication between the two essential. Schools offer a wide range of ways for families to be involved from parent-teacher conferences to volunteer opportunities. When parents are actively involved in their child's school and classroom, the child learns that he or she is important.



## Activities for Families



- Read books that are interesting to your child.
- Ask your child to “read” his or her favorite book to you.
- Talk with your child: discuss what you are doing while performing everyday activities like cooking, driving or shopping.
- Listen carefully to your child. This will encourage him or her to talk, thus helping develop verbal skills
- Limit TV Time.
- Promote independence by allowing your child to perform age-appropriate tasks like helping at dinner time or picking up toys.

**naeyc**  
**note**

“In a high quality kindergarten, children will explore their world, encounter new ideas, make new friends- and continue blossoming into the people we want them to be”.

# GETTING STARTED

The kindergarten curriculum should provide for all areas of a child's development (physical, social, linguistic, aesthetic and cognitive) and should be incorporated across all subject areas. Subjects should not be studied separately; instead, they should be woven into learning experiences and projects throughout the day. This allows children to make meaningful connections and real-life application, which promotes understanding and a strong desire to learn. Goals for children must be realistic and reachable. An integrated curriculum not only builds on what children know and are able to do, but also introduces new concepts and skill in a developmentally appropriate and meaningful way.

## Assessments

When a child enters kindergarten, the school will sometimes give what is known as a "developmental screening" to each child. While this may sound scary, the purpose of the screen is to allow teachers to begin to get to know each child's early learning skills. The screen is never used to place or label children.

## naeyc note

Children need plenty of opportunities to master new skills and concepts with daily practice, but never with a "drill-and-kill" technique that leaves children unmotivated to learn.

When children work on problems that are engaging and age-appropriate, they learn to "plan and predict, share their hypothesis and ideas, draw and write about their observations and experiences, conduct research using the computer and resource books, work cooperatively, and do a host of other things that many people would be surprised to see kindergartners do".

Standardized tests for kindergarten children are generally not appropriate because they have limited language and writing skills, so the test may not reflect what children know. Also, children at this age develop according to their own timetable, making a standardized test less meaningful. Instead of testing kindergartners, teachers should collect samples of children's work to guide and adjust their teaching.



# TEACHING & LEARNING

Of the great many things children learn in kindergarten, the most significant is the process through which children learn to read and write.

Young children quickly learn that words have meaning and that they are a way to communicate ideas. However, the process by which reading and writing development occurs is a long journey.



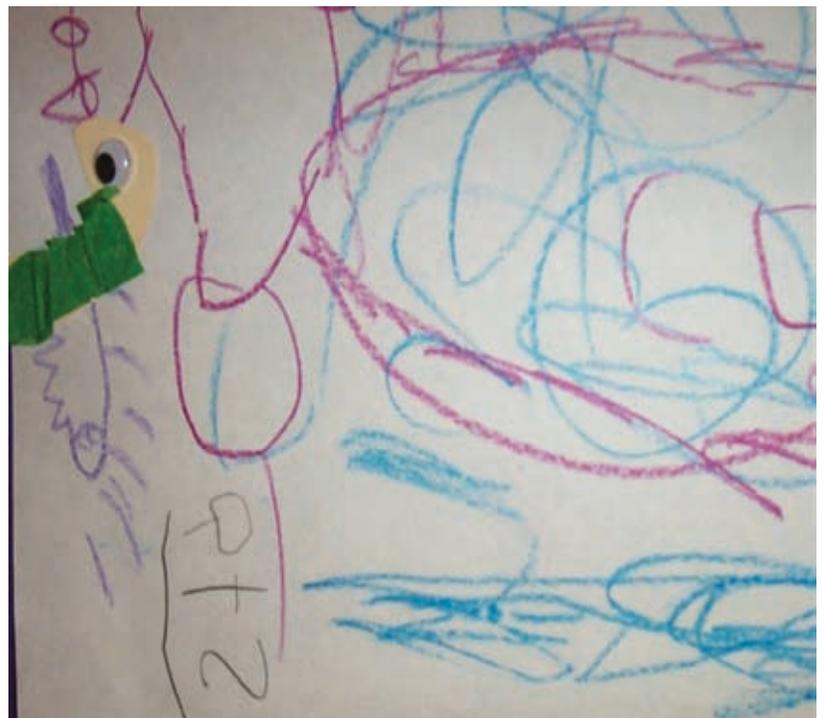
## Making Marks

A child's first attempt at writing is generally scribble-like marks that seem to go in every direction. These usually include large circular marks that are uncontrolled and resemble drawing (NAEYC). While the marks do not typically resemble print, they do represent ideas (Gentry). Although the random scribbles seem meaningless to adults, they are the foundation of all writing and signal that the child has begun the process of learning to write (NAEYC).

It is important to know that while each child makes this journey at his or her own speed, the landmarks are the same. To best prepare children for this journey, parents and teachers should offer plenty of opportunities for children to experience reading and writing, and encourage children at every stage of development.

## The Developmental Stages of Writing

Writing development generally emerges in a predictable order, though no one can predict how long a child will take to master each stage. When children scribble, practice letter writing or "invent spelling", they make discoveries, learn new skills and incorporate already acquired skills into newly mastered forms.



# READING & WRITING

## Drawing & Writing

In the early stages of writing development, there is often not much difference between a child's writing and his or her drawing. Children at this stage will often "draw" letters just as they draw pictures of objects. As writing begins to develop, distinctions between writing and drawing become more noticeable. In separating writing and drawing, children begin to understand the symbolic nature of writing (NAEYC).



## Word Writing

Once a child learns to spell his or her own name, he or she will soon begin to experiment with other new words. Using familiar letters and sounds, the child will create new words. Families and teachers help this process by helping young children say the letters and link the letters to sounds. Through this practice, the basic skills needed to spell new words are developed. From here, children will go on to write entire stories.

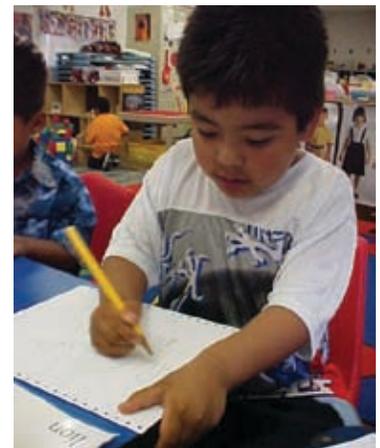


## Name Writing



Learning to write his or her own name is an exciting experience for a child. Soon, children will use the letters of their own name to write lists, create signs or pretend to take phone messages. At this stage, they are able to identify the letters of their own name in other places, such as street signs or advertisements. They are also beginning to understand that different combinations of letters have specific meanings (NAEYC).

In all of the stages, it is essential to support children's continued development by encouraging them to write stories, letters, and lists.





## Fostering Reading

Learning to read is a naturally occurring process that unfolds as children try to make sense of the print found everywhere, from their favorite book to the grocery store. Before children

understand that sounds are represented by letters and words, children use pictures to figure out what words say. When a child sees a stop sign and notices the shape of the sign and the color red, that child has made a connection between the color and the shape. If someone tells the child that particular sign says stop, an early reading connection has been made using color, shape and word.

## Sound Awareness

During kindergarten, young children become aware of different sounds and through songs and rhythmic games (clapping games, name games) can figure out how they are same and different. This is an important precursor to identifying sounds that letters make. These ongoing experiences with rhymes and playing with words eventually help children learn that changing the sound of a letter will change what the word says.

## Print Awareness

Recognition of familiar words is called print awareness. Children begin to recognize print on familiar food containers and classroom labels (especially their own name). Adults can help by pointing out the names of labels and words that are important and useful to children.

## Vocabulary

Hearing and trying out a lot of new words is a big part of learning to read. Reading a variety of books helps children develop and expand their vocabulary. Providing them with lots of opportunities to talk also fosters their understanding of words.

## Reading Comprehension

In kindergarten, children can recall the stories they hear and relate them to their own experiences. They can retell stories in their own way and point out what will happen next. Encouraging children to retell stories using puppets, props, and skits helps to build their retelling and comprehension skills.

## Reading Stories

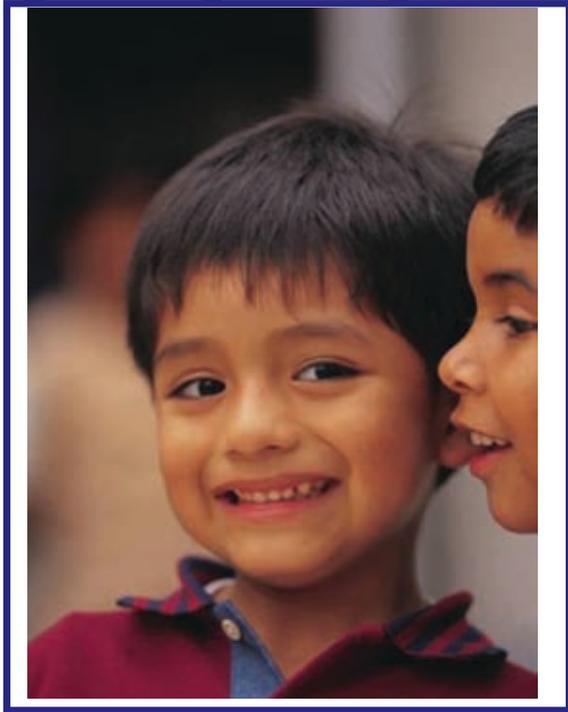
Daily reading with children is one of the most important activities parents and teachers can do. Encourage children by accepting their reading efforts (don't correct them) and providing exposure and instruction that is matched to their development.



# UNDERSTANDING KINDERGARTEN

Kindergarten is a magical time for a child. With the right environment, a healthy partnership between family and the school, and an understanding of the ways in which young children learn, kindergarten can be the first step in encouraging a child to become a life long learner.

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Deputy Commissioner for Education

**Jacqueline Jones**  
Assistant Commissioner for  
Early Childhood Education

## Resources for More Information

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